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REAL-TIME POLITICAL NEWS: DESIGNING INFORMATION FLOWS IN AN ONLINE SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

The article describes a case study: the design and delivery of a university media course on the changing forms of communication and mediated political participation in liberal democracies. The course takes a heuristic, immersive and authentic assessment approach to professional media education. It works from the premise that participation in scenario-driven simulated public events, with students in the roles of journalists, politicians, support staff and civil society actors, deepens professional and democratic understandings about what is at stake for democracy in digital culture's acceleration of political and public communication. The role-play, set in a fictional Westminster-style democracy, occurs at a time when access to public information has broadened, and Web 2.0 technologies have impacted on the speed, transparency and accountability in journalism and political practices. The aim is to replicate the quickening flows of political information and their viral nature; and to understand significant media-political relationships; the ideologies and affiliations of opposed news institutions; and political networks' competition for influence. Course features include a theoretical preparation and writing praxis period, augmented by guest lectures from media and political representatives. Students then enter the Digital Information Flows Scenario (DIFS) in a fictional polity, *Incognita*, and act within their role and group affiliations, circulating and responding to texts in various formats for different readerships. What can be achieved using this approach?

KEYWORDS

media, democracy, e-SIM, authentic role-play, information flow

1. INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL INFORMATION FORCES AT PLAY

Not all the outcomes of digital change have been good for Australian journalism or for the health of the country's political culture. On one hand, news perspectives have diversified with online versions of print newspapers, and this is a good development as a democracy is best served when its citizens have access to a range of views and values online, especially if local access to news is limited to one or two sources. Digital culture has also improved the transparency of government: websites have increased transparency and accountability, and citizens expect to be invited to participate in policy consultations. Parliamentary debate is webcast live, familiarising the polity with democratic arrangements and practices. On the other hand, media pay walls prevent full access for some potential subscribers, resulting in elite and niche conversations about public matters, where once national news in print or on television were the key influencers in national debates. Audiences do not routinely turn in great numbers to political broadcasts out of election periods, unless there is an issue of significance – or notoriety – claiming their attention. The imagined community model (Benedict Anderson's print nationalism) is profoundly altering, as once-captive consumers move online, exercising more choice and even producing their own versions of events on comment pages and in citizen journalism. News distribution traditionally needed to dovetail with daily print news or television programming schedules. The digital revolution has rendered those requirements almost redundant. Professional life is not easier for media workers as a result, as the Internet speeds up information flows; and journalists are thought of as autonomous: required to report, write, edit, and publish to different platforms 24/7. Complex and contradictory forces are at play making this a time of transition for journalism and political practice in democracies.

Mainstream industry change in the media sector has been dramatic (The State of the News Media, 2011), but not the death predicted years ago. Instead the sector survives by adapting and innovating. Over a decade of diminishing print circulation figures mean that proprietors struggle to find an effective business model, and have redesigned newsrooms to match the reduced and re-skilled workforce in an attempt to meet the realities of multiplatform competition coupled with an abundance of information. A NewsLtd editor states,

> *I knew something had to change, I wasn't sure what it was, but we had a long hard look at the newsroom and we realised it was a pyramid based (with decisions) flowing from the top to the bottom. That may have been fine a century ago but it just wasn't working now. It was inhibiting communication. The amount of information flowing onto the floor was doubling every year, and it was inhibiting our capacity to do the job properly (Mansell, quoted in Evershed, 2011)*

The 'journalism of the future' debates, proliferating since the arrival of online media, now incorporate the radical changes to integrated and flatter commercial media newsrooms with a small staff of key journalists and a host of 'general' reporters. Horizontal reorganisation is productive for media management and even journalists, but it also flags that society's interpreters are under pressure to adapt to extreme pressures. As news cycles speed up, the depth of political and policy coverage is affected by the lack of time to research, compare and deliberate before turning on the media megaphones. Add these factors to subscriber pay walls, reductions in local content, and a trend to tabloidization and together they are capable of altering the democratic nature of the public sphere of debate.

Social networking is another phenomenon impacting strongly on 'heritage' media's role in democracy. Twitter is seeding and re-seeding news agendas as public figures take to micro-blogging to bypass the potentially negative or speculative interpretations journalists might make of their conduct.

The Australian Prime Minister has nearly 227,000 followers; her rival Kevin Rudd has over 1 million: this seeds the substance of a story by a political reporter in The Age newspaper (Wright, 2012). Social media increases the velocity, noise and confusion of public conversations with the result that media storms and moral panics are emerging more frequently. The years from 2009-2012 provide evidence of media events and political scandals based on the perceived personal failures of elites: politicians and journalists. Two contemporary instances are illustrative: a sitting MP used parliamentary right of reply to accuse the opposition and mainstream media of attacking the 'presumption of innocence' regarding investigations of his actions. Secondly, a 2011 class action won by nine litigants from the indigenous elite against the prominent NewsLtd journalist and blogger Andrew Bolt, using the Racial Discrimination Act (Quinn, 2011; Connor, 2011), demonstrates - through the resurgence of the 'freedom of the press' debate accompanying coverage - a national unease about apparently shifting boundaries in media practices. Although competition for the news and commentary space comes increasingly from non-journalists, freelance writers, activists, public relations sources, citizen bloggers and politicians and their staff, and e-participation by the polity has never been more possible, it is ironic and possibly consequent upon greater transparency and access that the standard of media reportage and political commentary is being seen as deficient. The Australian government moved swiftly to institute the local Independent Media Inquiry (2011) to review the effectiveness of Australian media self-regulation, following the exposure of criminal activity in the UK phone hacking scandal by Murdoch's NewsCorp, which has dominant holdings in Australia (Phone Hacking Scandal, 2011). Its findings have not been received well by the sector nor by supporters of unrestricted freedom of speech.

What does this complex of factors mean for media students and their educators? The craft of journalism was once taught with fairly reliable knowledge of the likely demands, requirements and typical formats of the newsgathering profession. Now formats, modes, audiences for and definitions of journalism are altering. The speed and provenance of digital information are among the 'problems' of political journalism.

These realities, allied with the public cynicism about political figures, mean that educators need to take a different approach. The following experiment in authentic simulation of professional tasks and roles was designed to investigate how students can be prepared for joining professional communities of practice, yet allow a space for self-reflexivity and critical approaches to real-time news practices. Academics need to consider, as Lombardi (2007, p.9) notes on authentic learning, eight critical factors: course goals, content, instructional design, learner tasks, instructor roles, student roles, technical affordances and assessment. These factors are described below, as they play out in relation to the DIFS blended E-SIM.

2. MEDIA DEMOCRACIES AND E-PARTICIPATION 2010-2012

2.1 GOALS AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

The third-year media course *Media Democracies and E-Participation* (*MDEP*) which hosts *DIFS* goes into its fourth iteration in 2012. It is

taught as part of a professional award, the Bachelor of Media, in a research university with long-established face-to-face teaching traditions and, as yet, patchy support for online course development. In 2009, the university's Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) provided online course designers to work with academics interested in developing their courses for 2010 delivery. The aim of the e-Enhanced Learning and Teaching Project (e-ELTP) was to add special portable trial features to existing courses, by using the content management system (CMS), MyUni, a locally governed customisation of Blackboard (http://www.blackboard.com). MyUni content includes: course information (announcements, email, and lectures - both text and recorded); a full grade centre accessible to student view; tutorial group management tools (groups, Respondus for e-tests, TurnitIn for plagiarism detection; and an online assignment dropbox, SafeAssign); limited course owner customisation features (colours and selections from the toolbox); and a limited range of social tools (wikis, blogs).

Few 'liquid content' features are visible in posted content, as security and functionality are privileged over the usual graphic design features found on most contemporary sites. Internal research shows that the *MDEP* cohort (in 2010) reported their usual practice was to visit MyUni once a day (Griffiths, 2010). Purposeful pedagogic or extensive use of MyUni's social or interactive features is not sufficiently subscribed, so the initiative aimed to change participation in online learning by showcasing selected first-year and third-year courses.

2.2 IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEMS IN THE 2009 ITERATION OF MDEP

The first delivery of the *MDEP* course in 2009 (without the e-SIM) proved ambitious for two reasons. Students quickly identified the limits of platform tools and insufficient capacity for interactivity to simulate news circulation or newsroom editorial processes. Secondly, the range of unfamiliar assessment choices, the offer to negotiate details of assessment tasks, or to find equivalencies, tested the willingness of students to experiment. Instructors aimed to address students' general knowledge, work-readiness, resilience and adaptability to the speed and competition of professional routines, and to the variety of likely work assignments. e-ELTP offered a co-creative space where academic convenors and technical designers could collaborate on trialling portable tools designed to match course aims in situational learning. 'Getting students up to speed' was the goal.

2.3 INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN: INITIAL PROCESSES

MDEP aims to develop a sophisticated understanding of the complex influences on, and relationships made between, media practitioners, citizens, and politicians in a digital democracy. The pedagogic challenge is to engage with students' acculturation to media practices as consumers, followed by critical attitudes and the practical capacity to function professionally and ethically within a media landscape dominated by celebrity news and a focus on negative aspects of political culture. A learning outcome is heightened awareness of political rhetoric and spin. It is known that the effect on democratic participation of negative political campaigns is to increase political cynicism (Dermody & Scullion, 2003).

Online trial components needed to reflect relevant aspects of digital politics as well as media realities: simulated event creation and real-time reportage; the value of visualisation; video image upload and analysis, an online architecture which demonstrated the powers and limits of public speaking positions;

gatekeeper versus unmediated access to readerships; increased desire for public transparency; online anonymity, provenance and identity questions; the regulation of free speech; the mediation and redistribution of information; the private and public spaces of the Internet. Along with questions of accountability and 'public interest' information, the online space would be required to illustrate, albeit fictionally, journalism's role in democracy. It was to blend lecture and tutorial content with e-activities. The online design, developed over a series of meetings, included use of anonymised user IDs for an eSIM scenario in which governance tools would enable student peer access to full editorial and page management functions - a first step to an immersive, empowered experience.

2.4 CONTENT AND STRUCTURE – OPPORTUNISM, CO-CREATION AND FLEXIBILITY

Collaborator aims coalesced in the content choices and course structure: the first e-SIM coincided with a state election in which a moral panic about a politician's alleged behaviour dominated political coverage, putting comparisons of policy platforms second. At the Federal level, the release of an 'open government' discussion paper (Engage 2.0) and mandatory internet filtering proposals were utilised as well as as, at international level, Wikileaks' release of the US military video footage, which brought the whistleblower site and Julian Assange, an Australian citizen, to global attention. Such events provided scale and complexity in the e-SIM, as selected issues could be worked out through mirror techniques in the simulated polity.

Part 1 of the course analyses emerging online communication practices. Supplementing theoretical frameworks with accounts of experience of media, guest speakers included federal and state politicians, strategic communications officers, journalists and digital media specialists. The professional practices taught included news writing, online moderation, press release writing, television-style panel debates, citizen journalism, and the political use of social media like *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

In the eight-week preparation period, the assignment of E-SIM roles took place. Six tutorial groups were assigned group affiliations by the instructor, but could choose their own roles and authentic organisational structures. The groups included a social progressive government; a conservative parliamentary opposition; a left-leaning media group; a conservative media group; a public sector group of research organisations and telecommunications agencies; and a civil society group of citizens and activists including several citizen journalists in a simulated blogosphere.

Within that general framework, students were asked to devise appropriate individual role remits, chose a fictional name and write a biography to be published on the Who's Who directory of citizens in the e-SIM. In the private biography sent to teaching staff, students nominated a fact about their public figure, with potentially negative consequences if made public. The course reader is prescribed, and used to generate tutorial e-activities.

Table 1. Course reader topics

1	Journalists as mediators
2	Journalism as a democratic practice
3	Transcripts: event-driven political speeches
4	Practices, power and relationships
5	Democracies, deficits and ideologies
6	Viral communications: spin, celebrity, gossip
7	e-Participation: the political impact of social networking
8	Open government, new technologies

Part 2 involves the immersive e-SIM. Online activities run on a specialised *DIFS* site augmented by the students' use of their own social media sites, and private emails. The e-SIM is triggered by the entry of all participants into *DIFS*, where the crisis scenario details are posted. From then on all students are in role. Offline, tutorials are dedicated to strategic communications meetings, and text production and circulation. In the final weeks, the whole polity meets in real time to present at three off-line Summits where the role-players reveal their previously anonymous online identities to debate government and opposition digital policies, or report on digital policies presented. Votapedia, a free polling service from the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) with immediately displayable results, is used for comparisons of mobile and online polling on the issues presented at the Summits. The emphasis throughout is on learning through praxis and reflexive exercises.

2.5 LEARNER TASKS, INSTRUCTOR ROLES, STUDENT ROLES

The tasks of the learner are, firstly, to ensure adequate theoretical and practical preparation have taken place: understanding what is at stake in industry change for democracy; reading and commenting on a government digital policy paper; acquisition of an understanding of communication formats and uses; and demonstration of an ability to replicate them for target audiences. Secondly, the completion of individual and group oral, written and organisational tasks as dictated by roles in the eSIM polity, *Incognita*.

The name is both a reference to Aristotle's imagination of Australia as a great, undiscovered land in the south, thought to balance the northern landmass, and to the unknown outcomes of the flows of information in *DIFS*. In all aspects of history, geography, demography, social, media and political arrangements, *Incognitan* realities reflect Australian realities. For some participants, this represents a 'just-in-time' acquisition of information, redressing a potential deficit in general knowledge. Basing the polity on Australia also quickly creates shared cultural capital about how the E-SIM polity works. The tutorial lab setting allows for instantaneous online fact checking by students. The research e-activities reinforce that accuracy (not getting the story first) is an essential professional skill that, if abused, carries legal, reputational and professional consequences. The details of media industry change; the 'machinery of government' (now available as a mobile phone application); the differences between political parties and ideologies; the press gallery's symbolic and professional function; and examples from political commentary are used.

A briefing is given detailing recent *Incognitan* events, and flagging the likely policies for later public sphere debate. Student tutorial groups then begin their collective work. Within each group, 'Government', 'Opposition', 'Media Left' and 'Media Right'; 'Digital Business' sector organisations; and 'Civil Society', the appropriate hierarchical or flatter organisational structures are worked out, with some group members assuming leadership, spokesperson, or support roles. In Government, for example, party names, political orientations, party structures are decided; and ministerial and support staff functions and powers distributed as unequally as they are in any political party. Australia has two major news companies, NewsLtd and Fairfax, and Media Left and Right groups replicated prominent print tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, and their online versions; an internet television station; entertainment and independent news commentary. Basing corporations on Australian companies reduced the need to invent organisational cultures and readerships, and increased the portability of learning outcomes.

The potential for defamation claims by real organisations and public figures arising out of a learning activity was also reduced.

Instructors' tasks are to inform, suggest, facilitate and sometimes manage group interactions, as role-players move online and networking begins between groups. The academic instructor provides of a list of potential reactions to the trigger event, and facilitates the scoping of activities, relating E-SIM choices to real-world events and consequences. The flow of texts produces the *Incognitan* polity. It is up to students to check the provenance and relative importance of information in the digital noise. The MyUni 'site views' make participation visible and give certain flows accumulating significance.

The 2010 Summit scenario was based on citizens' rights and reaction to Australia's mandatory Internet filtering proposals. The *Incognitan* whistleblower site, Wik-I-Leaks (WIL) acted as a source of information 'noise' from which real-time news coverage flowed. The W-I-L site was the only one which staff managed exclusively throughout the e-SIM, selectively leaking private facts about *Incognitan* public figures already supplied in Part 1 assessment. As in contemporary Australia, subsequently journalists, party insiders and other sources 'leaked' information. The co-creation features afforded opportunities for peer discussions on media practices and professional ethics.

3. TECHNICAL AFFORDANCES

3.1 ANONYMOUS LOGINS

Anonymity online matched 2010 DIFS themes. Each student received an email with joining *DIFS* instructions, a random ('r') ID and password (which would be personalised) to use in addition to their official university 'a1xxxxxx' identifiers. A useful tool, it was chosen to diffuse the potential for personalisation and acrimonious political disputes to migrate from DIFS into real student-student relationships. Anonymised online accounts proved difficult to implement and manage within the university system. At the time, almost in step with government proposals for mandatory filtering to be conducted by ISPs – and public debates about anonymous user comments online – the university firewall firmed up institutional protections, blocking access to a list of restricted websites. High privacy settings; large numbers of annually changing users; different levels of access; and a secure data-rich environment can appear anomalous to students with notions of use and privacy derived from social networking sites. Experiencing CMS difficulties made it easier for students to compare online governance in university data systems with those in external settings such as media organisations, government and more familiar social network sites. 'R' andom access was time-consuming for site managers. It was not simply a permissions issue: once the lists of random numbers and original passwords had been generated, the matching of real names and fictional names was completed manually, and involved cross-checking with the grade centre listing of names. Earlier university e-SIMS had used group access, but the nature of DIFS required individuals to be subscribed.

As posting was anonymous, however, students experimented with role expectations and responsibilities freely, learning the limits of acceptable conduct.

3.2 'WHO'S WHO': THE INCOGNITAN DIRECTORY (A PUBLIC AREA, WITH INDIVIDUAL EDITING RIGHTS)

Straight after login, students published role biographies to an *Incognitan* 'Who's Who.' Again, this experiment, while it suited DIFS' goals, was a test bed for the online design team and aimed

at trialling the future viability of individually managed student homepages. The directory was a publicly accessed space, an aggregation of individual homepages. Searches for individuals went through group pages. Thus, all Media Left organisations occupied one group, as did all Opposition members. Public views of the directory provided essential peer information, and established polity relationships quickly. Fact checking and political profiling was more manageable for journalists. Individual homepage editing functions were given to each player. Most students uploaded pictures of favourite celebrities to add status to fictional names and biographies. The sharing of edited biographies (already graded in Part 1 of the course) raised the overall professionalism of the published outputs, and became a source of witty real-time exchanges, within MyUni, face-to-face, and on external sites.

3.3 RULES FOR UNEQUAL ACCESS (AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS) IN, AND BETWEEN, GROUPS

Establishing levels of communication privilege, as an authentic simulation of real relations of power, worked well as an experiential technique. Usually all students are guaranteed equal online access privileges, but access to areas of DIFS distinguished between less/more powerful groups and role-players using blogs, wikis and group management tools to reinforce the learning outcomes (see e-ELTP Media Examples (2011) for the group disposition in 2010).

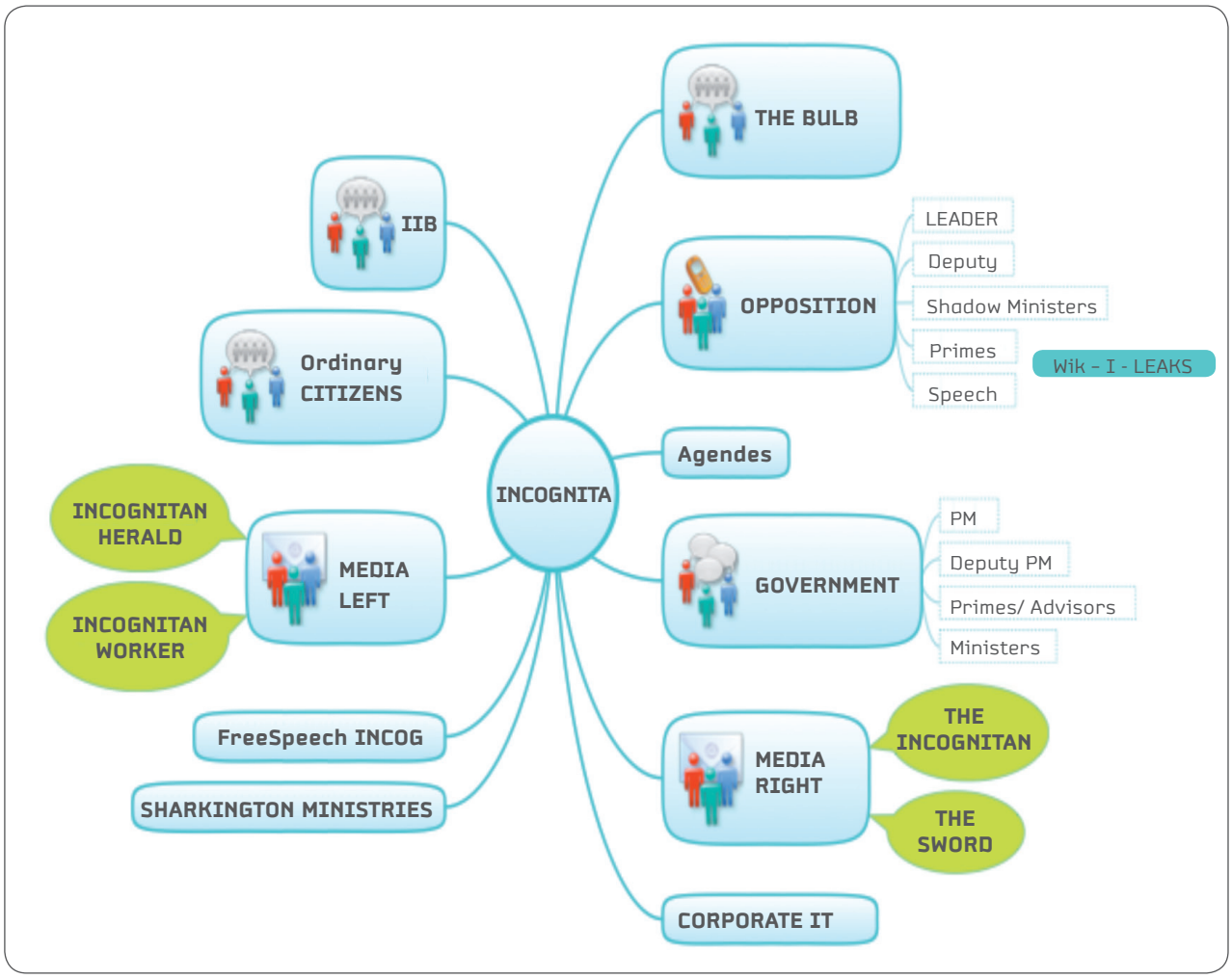
Political parties used private settings to strategise, and public websites to campaign. Hierarchical party relationships, represented by groups of ministers, parliamentarians, press officers, researchers, and speechwriters were agreed within groups.

Civil society organisations were smaller and did not have ready-made media communications staff or ease of access to media outlets. Members had group messaging and public posting permissions, but were not allowed to 'own' a shared visible public space. They were therefore required to use press releases, go through journalists as mediators, be part of 'vox pop' video, or write letters to editors or their members of parliament. Going through mediators slowed some participants down, until they found ways of establishing their own distribution platforms. The *Independent Incognitan Blogosphere* (IBB) had 'comment' tools attached, and was open access for viewing and subscription by all citizens. IBB became the default online publishing space for those who were late DIFS entries, felt disorientated by the speed and variety of information, or were averse to group-work.

Conversely, all media organisations had privileges, publishing to branded platforms, where designated editors were empowered to refuse publication to journalists, politicians, or citizens; choose letters and commentary; and edit work before publishing.

To offset disparities in additional work, assessment equivalences were negotiated for, for example, the editors and party leaders, (usually reduced word lengths for assignments were offered, but rarely taken up). All students were allowed to use 'private' settings within MyUni for group email to organise their work, but more adventurous (or impatient) students chose to migrate out of the MyUni system, returning to familiar social networking territory by setting up specialised Facebook or false Twitter accounts under their fictitious names. These became an authentic, if unplanned, feature of later *DIFS* too, as students found it easier to post YouTube video footage, create wordpress blogs, and use Twitter hashtags to comment live on presentations at the policy summits than upload to MyUni ('Chloe Thompson', 2011; 'Virginia Fierce', 2011; 'Jules Townsend' 2011).

Figure 2. Visualisation of Incognita



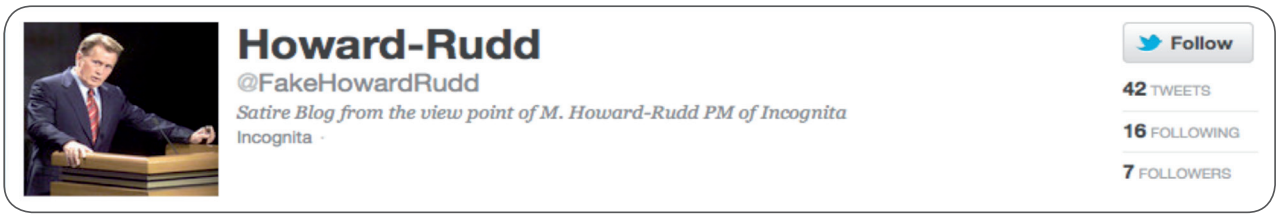
Group competition demonstrated itself in visual branding exercises, networking with affiliated groups, in provocative publicity, or a barrage of political speeches and news commentary. A typical 'sticky' site was 'Government', with over 1550 views over a three-week period. Opposition pages had high individual views, depending on professional authenticity and content. The number of rapidly growing page views over the pre-Summit period demonstrated that some events required at least passive student attention, thus replicating real-life media storms. The Comment pages were slow to build up participation over such a short period but interactivity between some groups and individuals was high.

4. MEDIA EVENTS AND REAL-TIME NEWS

Face-to-face attendance at the three policy Summits (media events) is compulsory. Overall *DIFS* participation is worth 15%. 'Government' held the first community cabinet and, over the next week, before 'Opposition' has 'right of reply' the flow of texts intensified. Journalists from, for example, 'The Matinee Buzz', 'The Incognitan', and 'The Daily Worker' acted as press gallery (Incognita's 'Meet the Press", 2011)

Confidence in roles had largely been established by the Summits. Doorstop

Figure 4. Fake Twitter account, @FakeHowardRudd



interviews with politicians or their interlocutors were held outside a Press Club, and later posted to YouTube. The two international students running an Internet TV station made seven-minute update news reports shown prior to each summit. Instant polling at the end of each Summit used the free Votapedia platform (CSIRO) and gave a snapshot of the mood of the citizen assembly. Press releases, and interviews with key personnel, were published on political party websites; commentators published opinion. The third Summit given over to media, activist and citizen journalist retrospectives took a television panel format, simulating the ABC's top public affairs program Q&A. A newspaper front page simulating *The Australian*, Australia's NewsLtd daily broadsheet, was produced quickly.

The E-SIM benefitted from students' willingness to play by DIFS rules, to experiment, and compete. As with the instructor reaction to technical glitches, players became opportunists, willing to push personal boundaries within a short, intense timeframe. Live tweeting to fake sites occurred during the Summit presentations, demonstrating the influence of social networking in public debate, and connections to mainstream news.

A period in virtual asynchronous space prior to the blended Summit experience, enabled the DIFS 'real-time' news environment to display the nature and speed of information flows and the quality of public interactivity.

5. ASSESSMENT

The course aim was to contextualise the trends in complex information flows through experiential learning, and develop student understanding through simulated participation in political news online and face-to-face spaces. The replication of complex information flows (e.g., from press release or speech to news story, interview, twitter conversation and broadcast interview or blog post), and professional relationships of power, resulted in a multitude of public and private texts being produced. Oral presentations, blog entries, campaign posters, speeches, editorial work, television news, and reportage were popular. Policy documents and research were also produced. Students put all texts (print, online, video, audio) and accounts of their strategic work into a portfolio for grading. *DIFS* accounted for 50% of the marks. Students found negotiating equivalencies a novel experience. An unexpectedly high number of participants had 'lived' *DIFS*, logging on several times a day (exceeding normal practice), and building a professional portfolio of sample texts. Many had not only utilised all communications options, but sought more externally.

6. SUMMARY: FUTURE *DIFS*

Course evaluation results were positive, and indicated *DIFS* was valued for its experiential complexity and depth, its challenges, and the portability of the capacities taught. Reflexive student comments referred to the

usefulness of the experience of producing under sustained and integrated pressures, and their competitive responses to agenda-setting activities by other groups. It led some to decry particular media practices, such as reductive commentary. Free-form student comments noted the creative, flexible nature of the course, indicated personal learning outcomes, while suggesting a tighter organisational structure. Co-creative course practices were thus less well understood.

Technical problems were considered disruptive but, in their way, instructive regarding unreal expectations of professional workplaces. Going outside the university CMS is not endorsed institutionally, so the eSIM experience was the result of adapting to limits, and co-creating the course with designer and student participation during delivery.

Future research will focus on when negotiated learning can most usefully begin, and its limits. In 2012, DIFS focuses on Twitter uses, and the government's privacy policy. The mapping of microblog influence is just beginning (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason & Watts, 2011; Schoon & Cain, 2011). In terms of simulating real-time news, it will be useful to add knowledge of social media metrics to the learning outcomes, as these drive business strategy, as well as influence political culture.

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